



September 16, 2013

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch  
Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: WC Docket No. 13-184

Dear Ms. Dortch:

The National Hispanic Media Coalition (“NHMC”) respectfully submits this letter in response to the Federal Communications Commission’s (“Commission”) Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (“NPRM”) designed to modernize the E-Rate program, which supports broadband connectivity in schools and libraries.<sup>1</sup> NHMC has participated in various E-Rate proceedings before the Commission,<sup>2</sup> advocating for common sense improvements that would enable efficient access to E-Rate services and ensure that E-rate services and equipment are effectively utilized. This rulemaking, in tandem with President Obama’s ConnectED initiative, has the potential to dramatically improve E-Rate so that it may better meet the broadband needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the outset, NHMC commends the Commission and the Obama administration for recognizing the continued importance and success of E-Rate and for outlining a bold vision for its future. With “E-Rate 2.0,” as coined by Commissioner Rosenworcel earlier this year, and the “ConnectED initiative,” recently announced by President Obama, a clear goal for the future of broadband access in schools and libraries has been set – to achieve gigabit connectivity in all U.S. schools in coming years. Meeting this goal would not only revolutionize education through new innovations in digital learning, but it would be a significant step towards leveling the playing field for traditionally disadvantaged students and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> *Modernizing the E-rate Program for Schools and Libraries*, WC Docket No. 13-184, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, (rel. Jul. 23, 2013) (“NPRM”).

<sup>2</sup> See Comments of the National Hispanic Media Coalition, *Schools And Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism*, CC Docket No. 02-6; *A National Broadband Plan For Our Future*, GN Docket No. 09-51, (Jul. 9, 2010), available at <http://www.nhmc.org/sites/default/files/NHMC%20E-Rate%20Comment.pdf> (“2010 Comment”); Comments of the National Hispanic Media Coalition, *Schools And Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism*, CC Docket No. 02-6, (Jul. 15, 2011), available at [http://www.nhmc.org/sites/default/files/NHMC%20ERate%20ESL%20Comment\\_0.pdf](http://www.nhmc.org/sites/default/files/NHMC%20ERate%20ESL%20Comment_0.pdf) (“2011 Comment”).

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In the past, NHMC's E-rate advocacy had focused on a few key issues that it identified after interviewing a number of teachers and administrators in diverse schools and districts in the greater Los Angeles area. In sum, NHMC found that: (1) Latinos and other diverse students confront an unmet need for significant and robust out-of-school and after-hours computer and broadband access; and (2) teacher comfort with technology is not uniform and professional development opportunities in this area are lacking.<sup>3</sup> NHMC is pleased that the Commission and President Obama have also recognized these challenges and that the NPRM affords an opportunity to refresh certain proposals in these areas. NHMC also recognizes that the current funding cap prevents the program from meeting current demand, much less the increased demand that these initiatives will bring, and must be raised so that all schools and libraries can access the services that they need. The Commission should also grant schools some flexibility in how they spend E-Rate funds, as they are best situated to assess and meet their existing needs.

### **After-Hours and Out-of-School Broadband Access**

The need for students to have consistent access to a high-speed broadband connection outside of the classroom is greater than ever. According to a 2008 survey, 77 percent of teachers responded that they or a colleague assigned homework that required Internet access to complete – and that number is certain to be rising.<sup>4</sup> Beyond simply completing assignments, various educational enrichment activities such as accessing homework help, conducting independent research, or reviewing supplemental materials, require Internet access and can often only be completed outside of class. This is particularly troublesome for Latinos and other traditionally disadvantaged communities that lag in home broadband adoption.

Although the E-rate program has been undeniably successful in connecting schools and libraries, no program has been able to match this success when it comes to home broadband adoption. As Commissioner Rosenworcel has noted, E-Rate boosted school access, from only 14 percent of public schools having a connection in 1996 to over 95 percent of classrooms today.<sup>5</sup> However, home broadband has been stagnant, particularly for Latinos, with only slightly more than half of Latinos subscribing to home broadband,<sup>6</sup> far below the national average. Notably, only 3 percent of teachers in low-income schools

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<sup>3</sup> See 2010 Comment.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Barrett, "77% of Teachers Assign Internet-Required Homework: Survey," MULTICHANNEL NEWS (Oct. 24, 2008), available at <http://www.multichannel.com/internet-video/77-teachers-assign-internet-required-homework-survey/130705>.

<sup>5</sup> Remarks Of Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, Washington Education Technology Policy Summit Washington, D.C. (Apr. 11, 2013), available at [http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs\\_public/attachmatch/DOC-320122A1.pdf](http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-320122A1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> KATHRYN ZICKUHR & AARON SMITH, PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT, HOME BROADBAND 2013 3 (2013), available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Broadband.aspx>.

believe that all or almost all of their students have the access they need at home to effectively complete assignments.<sup>7</sup>

In this proceeding, the Commission seeks comment on a novel way to leverage the success and the impending expansion of the E-Rate program to provide students with the access that they need, when they need it, without causing schools to incur additional costs: wireless community hotspots.<sup>8</sup> The Commission has already recognized that the public interest and the Commission's statutory objectives are satisfied when E-Rate funded services are made available to students and the general public after hours, and revised its rules accordingly.<sup>9</sup> However, as NHMC has recognized in past filings<sup>10</sup>, it is difficult for cash-strapped schools to pay staff and security for working the extra hours necessary to keep the facilities open.

NHMC welcomes the NPRM's exploration of wireless community hotspots emanating from E-Rate funded schools and libraries and believes that they could be a helpful, albeit limited, way for students to achieve after-hours access without requiring the institution to staff the facility. While this could give students the access they need to complete assignments, assuming they have their own devices, current wireless access point technology would likely limit these hotspots to smaller geographic areas, such as the school or library parking lots. However, as those without home broadband access go to increasingly desperate lengths to access the Internet to complete homework assignments, be it spending countless hours at fast food restaurants<sup>11</sup> or pulling off the side of a busy highway<sup>12</sup>, perhaps a school or library parking lot would be a welcome or more convenient alternative. For students without devices, the Commission should continue to explore ways to subsidize personal education devices or support sufficient after hours staffing at E-Rate funded school computer labs, including exploring the possibility of joint efforts with the Department of Education, which may have additional funds at its disposal.

Because there is no real substitute to home broadband access on a personal computer or tablet device, the Commission should redouble its existing efforts to spur home broadband adoption to ensure educational equity. The Lifeline program could be a wonderful complement to the E-Rate program for low-income Americans, if it were expanded to include standalone broadband access. There is ample evidence that the Lifeline program

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<sup>7</sup>And, surprisingly, only about half of teachers in upper middle or upper income schools believe that all or almost all of their students have sufficient access. KRISTEN PURCELL ET AL., PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT, HOW TEACHERS ARE USING TECHNOLOGY AT HOME AND IN THEIR CLASSROOMS 44 (2013), [http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP\\_TeachersandTechnologywithmethodology\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_TeachersandTechnologywithmethodology_PDF.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> NPRM at ¶¶ 319-323.

<sup>9</sup> *Schools And Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism*, CC Docket No. 02-6; *A National Broadband Plan For Our Future*, GN Docket No. 09-51, Sixth Report and Order, ¶ 23 (rel Sept. 28, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See 2010 Comment.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Troianovski, "The Web-Deprived Study at McDonald's," WALL ST. JOURNAL (Jan. 28, 2013), *available at* <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324731304578189794161056954.html>.

<sup>12</sup> THE INTERNET MUST GO, <http://www.theinternetmustgo.com> (last visited Sept. 16, 2013).

currently serves precisely the people that still lack broadband service at home.<sup>13</sup> Further, providers have begun to roll out low-cost home broadband offerings that have the potential of fitting nicely into the Lifeline program.<sup>14</sup> Finally, as Lifeline could be the missing piece in this equation designed to connect students, the Commission should forcefully reject any proposals that would shift funds from Lifeline to E-Rate.

## **Teacher Technology and Digital Literacy Training**

In past comments, NHMC shared conversations that it had with teachers revealing that teacher comfort levels with technology ranged from tech savvy to “computer illiterate.”<sup>15</sup> Without proper training, teachers are unable to effectively harness the technology and services provided through E-Rate funding. This problem is exacerbated in schools that serve populations that are predominantly diverse or low-income. In these schools, teachers cannot assume that students have experience with the Internet or have any familiarity with computers and, therefore, may not only need to understand technology for themselves, but may need to assist students with basic applications. As curricula move increasingly online, this problem will only worsen.

NHMC is pleased that President Obama recognized the importance of teacher training in the formulation of his ConnectED initiative. In the administration’s plan, the Department of Education is directed to utilize existing teacher professional development funds to support greater technology training. This is not only important, but a necessity, and NHMC is looking forward to working with the Department of Education to ensure that the existing needs are met.

While teacher training challenges are not directly addressed at any length in the Commission’s NPRM, NHMC believes that the Commission may have a role to play in assessing the need of schools. Through the E-Rate application process, the Commission has multiple touches with schools and school districts across the country. It should collaborate closely with the Department of Education as it works to implement the President’s ConnectED plan, to ensure that professional development monies set aside for technology training make it to the most needy schools.

## **Raise the Cap and Allow Some Flexibility in Spending**

In the NPRM, the Commission seeks comment on whether or not it should raise the cap on the E-Rate program to meet the connectivity goals that it has identified. As the current cap has not been significantly raised in many years and demand continues to grow, the

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<sup>13</sup> See Comments of TracFone Wireless, Inc., NTIA Docket No. 0907141137-05 (filed Nov. 30, 2009), *available at* <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/broadbandgrants/comments/rfi2/TracFone%20-%20Comments%20to%20NTIA%20and%20RUS%20sent%2011-30-09.2.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See Connect2Compete: Low-Cost Computers & Discounted Internet, <http://www.connect2compete.org> (last visited Sept. 16, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> 2010 Comment at 4.

Commission must raise the cap to a level that is sufficient to meet current and projected needs. Without such an increase, it will be nearly impossible to achieve the Commission's and the administration's lofty objectives.

NHMC also recognizes that many schools – even schools eligible for high discount levels under the program – are unable to receive all of the funding that they request. This is particularly true of “priority two” requests that fund provision of internal connections, among other services. The needs of schools across the country are as diverse as the populations that they serve and they are best situated to understand what they require to ensure that their students receive a top-quality education. For that reason, the Commission should allow some degree of flexibility to schools so that they can spend the funds that they qualify for in an efficient way.

E-Rate 2.0 and ConnectED represent not only the future of education in this country, but an opportunity to achieve greater equity in U.S. schools. In order to seize this opportunity, NHMC urges the Commission adopt the recommendations herein.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael J. Scurato', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael J. Scurato  
Policy Director  
National Hispanic Media Coalition